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## EMERSON IN HAWAII

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If, as Miss Heitman claims in her article in the *March Journal*, Emerson in the American high school is a Slough of Despond, what might one expect him to be in Hilo, Hawaii? What meaning can Emerson have to a Senior class composed of some twenty-five young Americans—Americans, that is, by loyalty, but according to the nationality of their parents as registered on the Board of Health cards, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, British, Hawaiians, Chinese-Hawaiians, Portuguese-Hawaiians, American-Hawaiians, and so on through all possible permutations and combinations of the various races that meet and mix in our lazy little tropical isle?

In Hilo, Hawaii, one is not cursed with an illusion of free will, as in High Point, North Carolina, where teacher and principal can peruse the list of college-entrance classics and debate, "Which shall it be, which shall it be?" All such trifling matters are fore-ordained for us by the Department of Public Instruction of the Territory of Hawaii with headquarters at Honolulu, two hundred miles away.

The first day we studied Emerson I assigned the whole essay on "Self-Reliance" for one reading. Yes, deliberately, with malice aforethought, and I am still unconfined in either a penitentiary or an insane asylum. It was like an icy shower-bath to those composed young Orientals. (If in the States you realize that the Oriental idea of a bath is to soak in a tub of water above 100° Fahrenheit, you will appreciate the force of the figure.) The period before the English class I surprised a consternation-stricken group of Seniors in the library, expressing their opinion of Emerson and, I presume, of me. One of my three white girls said to me as she came into class, "Mrs. Hazard, if you can get me to make head or tail of this stuff, you are a bright woman." Of course, I was not

going to pass up a dare like that; not when the whole class joined in the chorus that they "couldn't see any sense in that stuff."

In Hawaii even more than in the States, we are cursed by the conventionality of pupils. Partly from racial characteristics, partly from hampering environment, our pupils are diffident in self-expression, distrustful of their own ideas, lacking in initiative and originality. As far as a teacher will permit it, they recite in the exact words of the textbook. They will memorize everything; they object to thinking about anything. One of the first criticisms they passed on my teaching was, "Why, Mrs. Hazard isn't satisfied with the book! She expects you to think things out for yourself." So I was morally sure that, whether or not they wanted "Self-Reliance," they needed it.

We began by "hitting the high spots." You know how Emerson soars from peak to peak, barely touching earth to gather force for another flight. I did not try to have them analyze or paraphrase or in any other fiendish way pin down the reasoning process taken by that lofty mind. I merely tried to give them some idea of how far "Self-Reliance" is above the everyday level. And we got that with the fourth sentence: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius."

"How many times," I asked them, "have you had an idea when a teacher asked a thought-question, but you were ashamed of your idea, and sat still, and then someone else got up and said just what you were going to say, and he got the credit for the recitation and you did not?" This was putting the matter on a low plane, I admit, but the commercial side appeals to the Oriental, especially where a numerical grade must be given for each recitation.

They all saw the point and began to relax their animosity toward Emerson. I followed up this advantage by driving home the big thought of the essay, "Trust yourself." The other thoughts were more than subordinated: they were submerged. Everything that could impress upon them the value of self-trust was utilized from quotation of the old ragtime jingle, "Don't be what you ain't; jest you be what you is," to telling the story of a fine little sorority sister of mine who carried herself with perfect poise through all society

functions in the shabby little checked suit which she had worn two years to college and which was almost literally her "one clo'."

The Oriental genius for memorizing was directed to the selections beginning: "What I must do is all that concerns me, and not what the people think," and "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide." But the pupils were not allowed to stop with mere mechanical memorizing, but were asked to illustrate from their own experience and observation the truth of these quotations. Of course at first there was the familiar difficulty in correlating books and life. But I started them off with some homely examples, and soon they were vying with one another to give concrete applications of Emerson's abstract truths.

Judging by conventional standards, I am afraid the Department would not think I was teaching the class Emerson at all. We did not learn the dates of his birth or death, nor study the notes and introduction, nor outline a single essay. Emerson has long been among my prophets. I love him, and I wanted to lead my pupils to love him too; and I regard as proof that I succeeded the fact that when in the final examination several months later, I asked from what piece of literature read during the year they had gained the most, the verdict was almost unanimous for Emerson's Essays. The following answer by a Hawaiian boy is one of many:

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" was the most beneficial piece of literature that I have enjoyed this year. It has been of most educational value to me. It has made me think more seriously of the problems which I shall have to face in the near future.

To learn how to rely on one's self is not a very easy task. A young mind is restless and wanders over things thoughtlessly until it strikes something that awakens it to realize the fact about things surrounding its little sphere. That is how the essay on "Self-Reliance" has affected me. "Know Thyself," "Keep pegging along," and "Don't follow the crowd," are the lights which I intend to follow.

Another testimony came from one of my little Japanese girls in a letter she wrote me this summer. She wrote of an afternoon spent with two of her classmates. "We had a pretty long talk about the responsibilities placed upon us. It seems as if after our study of Emerson, suddenly common sense and self-confidence sprung up in us."

The change was evident even before we finished the study of Emerson. By the time we had finished "Self-Reliance" the class had gained in two things: ease in the world of abstract thinking, and self-confidence in expressing their own thoughts. This was strikingly shown the morning we began "Compensation." I first asked the easy question, "What suggested this subject to Emerson?" A dull but faithful pupil was ready with the reply that the essay was suggested by a sermon on the Last Judgment. Then I asked what was wrong with the preacher's doctrine. Is it not fair to suppose that the good will be rewarded and the bad punished in another life? Another pupil was quick with the answer that they are punished here. This was questioned. Some had known cases where honesty was not the best-paying policy, where the wicked flourished like a green bay tree. One pupil came back with, "Yes, but even if they are rich, nobody thinks much of them." But others cited cases where the evildoer had "got away with it" and enjoyed a good reputation. A more thoughtful boy replied, "Yes, but even if nobody else knows, he knows. You have to live with yourself, and if you do wrong your conscience hurts you." To this a tall, lanky youth objected, "The lower down a fellow gets, the less his conscience hurts him. By and by a real bad 'un doesn't care at all, and a fellow that tries to be decent feels cut up over a little slip. No, I tell you the bad people have the easiest time of it all around." Several of the class nodded assentingly and the last word appeared to have been said, when a young Japanese who had not taken part in the discussion before volunteered, "I think it is something like this. Washington says that every man has a sacred fire in his breast that he must strive to keep alive. If he lets it go out, he may not know it, but he is really dead. I think that is his punishment."

Sometimes I am very tired of teaching in Hilo; sometimes I long for concerts and lectures and theaters and college alumnae circles, and all the other fleshpots of Egypt; and then some day, like this morning with Emerson which I have been describing, I feel that I am helping these Hawaiian-born Americans to think—and I know what Emerson meant by compensation.